

THE FIRST BOOK OF MOSES CALLED GENESIS.

GENESIS, CHAPTER 12

Verses taken from “The Tanakh. The Jewish Bible.” The New Jewish Publication Society Translation According to The Traditional Hebrew Text.

Note to reader: Abram’s name is later changed to Abraham and Sarai is changed to Sarah, the names by which they are known today. (See Genesis 17:5 and Genesis 17:15) In conformity with the biblical text, they are referred to as Abram and Sarai until their names are changed.

12:1...The Lord said to Abram,

The Torah does not explain why God chose Abram. Noah was chosen because of his righteousness. (Genesis 6:9) And Moses nobility of character is revealed before God chooses him. We learn he killed an Egyptian overseer who was beating a Hebrew slave, he tried to resolve a fight between two feuding Hebrews, and he stood up on behalf of Midianite women who were being mistreated. (Exodus 2:11-17) But Abram’s selection seems completely arbitrary. Unlike Moses and Noah, we come to understand Abram’s greatness only later. (Hebrews, Chapter 11: 8-11)

There are two possible reasons for the choosing of Abram. One is he himself “discovered” the one God. And God responded accordingly. A second is God recognized Abram as a particularly great man worthy of being the father of the nation of Israel, a nation that would believe and have faith in the One True God. However, at this time, we are given no reason why Abram was chosen.

The truth is it really doesn’t matter. What matters is what happens once God chooses this individual named Abram. All of history will change.

12:1 (cont.)...”Go forth from your native land and from your father’s house to the land that I will show you.”

This is the first of several instances in which God tests Abram’s faith. Here, Abram is told to leave everything that is familiar to him and move to a place that is completely unknown. It is virtually identical to God’s later command (Genesis

22)—the ultimate test—that Abram sacrifice his son Isaac. God told Abram to sacrifice his son on one of the mountains that “I will show you,” virtually the same words used here. (“I will show you.”) Look for the connection in what we will refer to as the triplet here—the Hebrew reads “your land and your birthplace and your father’s house (For some reason, the present translation does not include “birthplace”) and the triplet in chapter 22—“your son, your only one, whom you love.”

12:2...”I will make of you a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you shall be a blessing.”

A blessing to whom? The answer is in the next verse: All the families of the earth.

To say nothing like this existed prior to the Torah is to understate the case. The idea that one nation will be a blessing for all other nations has no parallel.

In the course of Jewish history, many Jews have lost sight of this purpose of the Jewish people. One reason is antisemitism—Jews have so often been so preoccupied with simply surviving, they forgot their mission to humanity.

12:3...”I will bless those who bless you and curse him that curses you;”

One does not have to be a religious believer in order to acknowledge that this promise has held true. Nations that have treated the Jews favorably, the United States being the most obvious modern example, have been blessed with prosperity and freedom.

The reverse applies as well.

In the medieval world, Spain went into an economic and cultural decline after the 1492 expulsion of the Jews. In the modern era, Germany, the country that cursed the Jews of Germany and Europe with the Holocaust, then endured its own curse: During World War II, approximately seven and a half million Germans were killed. (German Red Cross estimate, 2005) About two million German women were raped, (Generally by Russian troops) almost a quarter of a million of whom died as a result, and Germany was divided for forty-four years. Nor is Germany’s future even now secure given the massive immigration of people, many of whom

do not share Germany's Western values, and the very low birth rate of native Germans.

After World War II, another group arose that has cursed the Jews—many of the countries in the Arab and fundamentalist Islamist worlds; and they are among the most intellectually and morally ignorant, as well as barbaric of societies.

12:3 (cont.)... "And all families of the earth shall bless themselves by you."

God does not tell Abram that "his" family will be blessed through him but that all the world's families will be blessed through him. That this theme is mentioned only three verses after introducing us to Abram makes it clear the mission of Abram and the Jewish people is universal. On four subsequent occasions in Genesis, the theme of universal blessings through the Jews is stated and tied to Abram and his descendants. (See Genesis 18:17-18, 22:16-18, 26:2-4, and 28:10-14)

The present translation is literal: The Hebrew says, the world's families "will bless themselves by you," not "be blessed by you." And how will people "bless themselves by you?" When the families of the earth learn how to act toward one another through living by the moral laws and values God will reveal to Abraham and his descendants. The road to a good world is through this Torah and the rest of the Bible. The world ignores the Torah and the Bible at its peril.

12:4...Abram went forth as the Lord had commanded him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he left Haran.

Abram was already an old man when he was sent on his world-changing mission. One lesson here is no one should ever think of themselves as too old to change or to do something meaningful. Later, in Exodus 7:7 Moses is described as eighty when he confronted Pharaoh. Both of these verses are particularly significant today when human lifespans have increased dramatically and people are remaining active and vital until much older ages.

12:5...Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother's son Lot, and all the wealth they had amassed,

It is not an insignificant detail that Abram was a wealthy man. Few great thinkers have been poor. Great thinkers think about the purpose of existence. For

the poor, the purpose of life is quite clear: to provide food and shelter for themselves and for their family. Only when people do not have to worry where their next meal is coming from do they have the time to think about great issues such as the purpose of life. This may also help to account for the fact that centuries later it was not a Hebrew slave who led the revolt against Pharaoh; it was Moses, the one Hebrew who had been raised in wealth.

Also, the Torah has no problem with wealth. Abram, the man through whom all the nations and families of the earth will be blessed, was wealthy. There are good and bad rich people and good and bad poor people. The Torah judges people by their character, not their wealth.

12:5 (cont.)...and the persons that they had acquired in Haran; and they set out for the land of Canaan. When they arrived in the land of Canaan,

12:6...Abram passed through the land as far as the site of Shechem, at the terebinth of Moreh. The Canaanites were then in the land.

These seemingly harmless words—“the Canaanites were then in the land”—have created controversy among Bible scholars. That the words are phrased in the past tense suggests that they were written at a time when the Canaanites were no longer in the land. But at the time of Moses, which tradition dictates as the time when the Torah was written, the Canaanites were still very present in the land. Therefore, some scholars cite these words to argue that there are verses in the Torah written after the age of Moses.

However, such a reading is unnecessary. The point of the notation is to introduce a certain tension with the immediately following promise that the land will be given to Abram’s offspring.

12:7...The Lord appeared to Abram and said, “I will assign this land to your offspring.” And he built an altar there to the Lord who had appeared to him.

12:8...From there he moved on to the hill country east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; and he built an altar to the Lord and invoked the Lord by name.

12:9...The Abram journeyed by stages toward Negev.

12:10...There was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was severe in the land.

“Egyptian texts substantiate the possibility of such an itinerary in the 2nd millennium B.C.”

12:11...As he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, “I know what a beautiful woman you are.

12:12...If the Egyptians see you, and think, ‘She is his wife,’ they will kill me and let you live.

Abram’s statement “they will kill me” raises an interesting question. God has already promised Abram many descendants, so why would Abram believe he might be killed? His fear reminds us that even great people of faith sometimes have doubts. Doubts are a part of faith. We should not feel overly concerned and certainly not demoralized when we have doubts. Doubts do not mean we are non-believers; rather, we are, “a believer who has doubts.”

The great American Rabbi, Emanuel Rackman, president of Bar-Ilan University, wrote: “Doubt is good for the human soul, for its humility...God may have had His own reasons for denying us certainty with regard to His existence and nature. One apparent reason is that man’s certainty with regard to anything is poison to his soul. Who knows this better than moderns who have had to cope with dogmatic fascists, communists, and even scientist?”

With regard to Abram’s fear of Egyptian violence, the Egyptians were deemed quite capable of killing strangers and taking their wives. Perhaps this story is included in order to show just how revolutionary was the new system of ethical monotheism (The doctrine or belief that there is only One God.) that God was trying to institute. In contrast to the normal behavior toward strangers in Egypt, God commands the Jews to love the stranger. (Leviticus 19:34, Deuteronomy 10:19, Exodus 22:21) In other words, the stranger was to be protected, although he was not a member of one’s family, clan, religion, community, or people, simply because he was a human being. In the stranger, therefore, man discovered the idea of humanity.

This was not the case anywhere else. (See Genesis 19) I have not found any other civilization that demanded love of the stranger.

12:13...Please say that you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you, and that I may remain alive thanks to you."

Throughout history, more than a few Bible readers have criticized Abram for having Sarai tell the Egyptians she is his sister. He has been criticized on two grounds: asking his wife to lie and putting her in a situation in which adultery would almost certainly take place.

However, when making moral decisions, the most important question is often this: What are my choices? If Abram and Sarai had decided she should tell Pharaoh the truth, they had every reason to believe Abram would have been killed. Would that have been the right choice? Would Sarai have preferred that choice? Would any wife who loved her husband? Moreover, how would that have guaranteed Sarai's safety? With her husband dead, Sarai would still have ended up in Pharaoh's harem.

It would seem that those who argue that Abram should have told Sarai to speak truthfully believe they are choosing morality over immorality but, what they are really choosing is chivalry and avoiding a one-time life-saving lie over morality, common sense, and the preservation of life. Those were the real choices confronting Abram.

While the Torah neither praises nor condemns Abram for asking Sarai to lie, the Bible does strongly suggest elsewhere that lying sometimes is justified. This is illustrated by an incident in the Book of Samuel when God instructs the prophet Samuel to lie. This took place during the reign of King Saul. The king had been appointed by God and anointed by the prophet Samuel. Yet when Saul disobeys a divine order, God instructs the prophet to go and anoint the young and valiant shepherd David as king. Samuel fears doing so: "If Saul hears of it, he will kill me." God then instructs Samuel, "Take a heifer with you and say, 'I have come to sacrifice to the Lord.'" (I Samuel 16:1-3)

Instead of assuring Samuel He will protect him, God tells Samuel to lie, thereby teaching him, and by implication all future Bible readers, one does not owe would-be murderers the truth.

As regards to adultery, although it seems Abram is asking Sarai to commit adultery, in fact Sarai would not have been considered an adulteress if Pharaoh had taken her against her will. A woman who submits to a forced sexual act (Whether she herself is married or whether the man forcing her is married) is not an adulteress.

During World War II, a Polish woman, Irene Gut Opdyke, hid twelve Jews in the villa of a Nazi Major, Edward Rugemer, for whom she was working as a housekeeper. When Rugemer discovered the Jews, he told Opdyke that he would have them all murdered unless she agreed to become his mistress. The arrangement between Opdyke and the married Rugemer continued for several months, until Opdyke and the twelve Jews were able to flee to the forest. In 1982, Opdyke was honored at Israel's Holocaust Memorial, Yad Vashem, where she planted a tree on the "Avenue of the Righteous." In 1995, she was also honored with a papal blessing from Pope John Paul II. Both Jews and Catholics recognize that Irene Opdyke was a saintly religious model.

We, of course, have no way of being certain about what Sarai thought of her husband's plan. However, given the openness of the Torah and the fact that Sarai does not hesitate to express her opinion on later occasions, (See, for example, Genesis 21:9-10) her silence was likely agreement.

12:14...When Abram entered Egypt, the Egyptians saw how very beautiful the woman was.

12:15...Pharaoh's courtiers saw her and praised her to Pharaoh, and the woman was taken into Pharaoh's palace.

12:16...And because of her, it went well with Abram; he acquired sheep, oxen, asses, male and female slaves, she-asses, and camels.

Cynics might argue that Abram asked Sarai to sleep with Pharaoh not just to save his life but, to acquire more wealth as well. However, based on Abram's future behavior, this explanation makes no sense. Abram refused wealth on two separate occasions in the very next chapter, when he offered Lot superior land to what he took for himself (Genesis 13:9-11) and again when he declined the spoils of war offered by the King of Sodom. (Genesis 14:21-24)

12:17...But the Lord afflicted Pharoah and his household with mighty plagues on account of Sarai, the wife of Abram.

12:18...Pharoah sent for Abram and said, “What is this you have done to me! Why did you not tell me that she was your wife?”

12:19...Why did you say, “She is my sister,” so that I took her as my wife? Now, here is your wife; take her and begone!”

It turns out that Abram’s belief that Pharoah would kill him if the king knew Sarai was his wife was probably right. Would Pharoah have returned Sarai to Abram absent the plagues that struck his household? There is ample reason to believe Abram and Sarai knew the nature of the people they were going to be dealing with in Egypt. Nor did they have reason to assume God would use a miracle to save them from Pharoah.

12:20...And Pharoah put men in charge of him, and they sent him off with his wife and all that he possessed.